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The Meaning of The Oppenheimer Verdict

I

The underlying assumption of the Oppenheimer verdict is that he and other scientists like him are no longer needed. His past Communist associations and radical sympathies were fully known to General Groves when Dr. Oppenheimer became his right hand man in the building of the A-bomb. The report of the special hearing board says "a calculated risk" was taken. Indeed the report discloses for the first time that the alternative considered by those in charge of security was "to open up the whole project and throw security to the winds rather than lose the talents of the individual." "What we have learned in this inquiry," the report observes, however, "makes the present application of this principle [of the calculated risk] inappropriate in the instant case." This says obscurely what has been evident for some time from a close scrutiny of official utterance, that the H-bomb is believed to be just about the limit of destructive power which can be safely used. The problem is no longer one of theoretical physics in the discovery of new and vaster weapons, but of applying known theory to the perfection and accumulation of fissionable and thermonuclear weapons.

But this, if true, is only true if one believes that no adequate defense is possible, or even worth exploring on any scale comparable to that expended on the A and H-bomb. The assumption that men like Dr. Oppenheimer can be dispensed with is interlocked with the assumption that the only real defense is overwhelming offensive power. This, too, is implied by the report. For it says that in "evaluating advice" from a scientist, government officials concerned with military matters "must also be certain that underlying any advice is a genuine conviction that this country cannot in the interest of security have less than the strongest possible offensive capabilities in a time of national danger."

This is the Air Force doctrine, *schrecklichkeit* in a new guise. The unfavorable verdict in this respect echoes the indictment brought against Dr. Oppenheimer by the Air Force. As was charged in the May, 1953, issue of *Fortune* in an article reflecting the Air Force point of view ("The Hidden Struggle for the H-Bomb"), "he [Oppenheimer] and his followers have no confidence in the military's assumption that SAC [Strategic Air Command] as a weapon of mass destruction is a real deterrent to Soviet action." The "General Considerations" with which the report seeks to establish principles for future cases makes this the orthodox standard and says advice which conflicts with it is to be regarded as suspect. In this guide to heresy hunting, it is the Air Force on which infallibility is conferred.

II

The full implications of this deserve the widest debate. It is well to recall that the decision to make the H-bomb was taken without consulting Congress or the public; it was only a chance indiscretion by a Senator which leaked the news in the fall of 1949. Now a further decision is taken by a hearing board which went beyond its sole constituted purpose —the Oppenheimer case. Without special military hearings, without listening to the opposing views in the Army and Navy and perhaps the Air Force itself, conformity with the point of view of the Strategic Air Command is made the standard for adjudging whether scientists and others are "security risks."

Thus another fundamental decision of military policy, on which nothing less than the life and death of our country itself may depend, is in danger of being foreclosed. "The strongest possible offensive capabilities" means that nothing is to detract from the main job of mounting the offensive. The psychology of that attitude was made vivid by Oppenheimer himself in the July, 1953, issue of *Foreign Affairs* ("Atomic Weapons and American Policy") when he lifted the curtain a little on a bitter intra-mural dispute. Oppenheimer reported, "A high officer of the Air Defense Command said—and this only a few months ago, in a most serious discussion of measures for the continental defense of the United States—that it was not our policy to attempt to protect this country, for that is so big a job that it would interfere with our retaliatory capabilities." Here we are at the heart of the real controversy which led to Oppenheimer's disgrace and banishment.

III

But do the people of this country want to give up the job of finding new and perhaps adequate defenses against A and H bombs? Are they to acquiesce like sheep in so fundamental a matter? Is the theory correct that massive and overwhelming retaliatory power will ensure peace by frightening the other side into submission? There is a passage in the same section of the report which suggests that history has already shown that this is false. The report discusses Oppenheimer's moral qualms and "emotional involvement" in having helped "to unleash upon the world a force which could be destructive of civilization." Then it says—and these are the words every American should ponder closely —"Perhaps no American can be entirely guilt-free, *and, yet, these weapons did not bring peace nor lessen the threats to the survival of our free institutions.*" (My italics).

This is quite a confession. If the hearing board does not think the A-bomb brought peace when we had a monopoly

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of it, what makes the board think bombs can bring peace when both sides have the power to destroy the other? This was the point made by Oppenheimer's famous simile in the same *Foreign Affairs* article when he compared U. S. and U.S.S.R. to two scorpions in a bottle. As for lessening "the threats to the survival of our free institutions," those threats are certainly internal as well as external. And this whole report shows how the spirit of our free institutions are being poisoned from within by the increased fear, hysteria and suspicion the fatal gift of nuclear fission brought with it.

IV

To cope with the dangers from the Pandora's box we ourselves unlocked, we must now seek "absolute security" (as the report puts it) and in that search resolve all doubts against the individual and in favor of the State. This is the first premise of totalitarian society. Just how far the shadow of this case may fall when extended by this means will be evident on reflection. All who agreed with Oppenheimer that the H-bomb should not be built must become suspect with him. The Atomic Energy Committee was 3-2 against the H-bomb; David Lilienthal, Sumner T. Pike and Dr. Henry D. Smyth agreed with Oppenheimer. The AEC General Advisory Committee was unanimously against an H-bomb "crash" program. According to the *Fortune* article, of all the scientists only Enrico Fermi of the University of Chicago "forthrightly sided" with the AEC minority, Lewis Strauss and Gordon Dean. Do all these become security risks or at least men whose advice is suspect?

The infection of the heresy reached into the hearing board itself. The one-man dissenter, Professor Ward V. Evans of Loyola University, who thought Oppenheimer's clearance should be restored, said of the scientist's qualms: "Only time will prove whether he was wrong on the moral and political grounds." And what of those men in the Administration, of Secretary of the Treasury Humphrey and Secretary of Defense Wilson and of Eisenhower himself who have been cutting Air Force appropriations and believe balanced forces and a healthy economy important to true defense? The theory made the orthodox standard by the hearing board is not the theory on which this present Republican Administration has proceeded, nor the theory implied in the President's famous atomic message of last winter. Can there be true debate and honest advice, mutual trust and respect, in the atmosphere this report reflects and will in turn deepen?

V

The impossible search for "absolute security" is incompatible with a free and healthy society. If this is to be national policy, why should anyone be trusted? There is a momentum here which plays into the hands of those who are prepared to be most unscrupulous and extreme in pandering to a growing paranoia. One of the charges against Oppenheimer is that he testified for others who were security risks. Shall we, then, trust the long list of men who testified on his behalf? They included some of the most distinguished names in American banking, business, education and science. But will this protect them from a Jenner or a McCarthy? Will the men who smeared General Marshall hesitate before these lesser lights in their struggle to achieve power by panic?

The way is cleared for them by the draconian rhetoric of the report. "There can be no tampering," it says, "with the national security, which in times of peril must be absolute, and without concessions for reasons of admiration, gratitude, reward, sympathy or charity." This is resonant with the fanaticism of Terror; this is the spirit in which Robespierre sent Danton to the gallows, and Stalin condemned Trotzky and Zinoviev. Neither "gratitude" nor "charity" is to stand in the way of "security." The only difference is that the wrinkled face of the counterrevolution, frightened of the future, peeps out from between these fallacious lines.

Why fallacious? Because they carry terrible and familiar hidden assumptions. "Security" is set up as a standard, as if it were a known quantity, easily weighed and determined. But actually where does security lie and who is to determine it? The answer of this report, if read closely, is that the military and the secret police are to be the judges. Not Congress, not popular discussion, not free debate, but the Generals and the FBI are to determine what "security" is and make the rest of us conform to that standard. The society sketched out by this report is a combination of the garrison and police states.

Attention is invited first to the final section of the "General Considerations." This deals with "the role of scientists as advisers in the formulation of government policy." It says that officials dealing with security and officials "charged with the military posture of our country" must be certain that the advice they seek "appropriately reflects special competence on the one hand, and soundly based conviction on the other, uncolored and uninfluenced by considerations of an emotional character."

This is naive. It tacitly assumes that somehow the security officers and the military men do approach these problems with objectivity and without emotional bias. But what is more emotional than J. Edgar Hoover talking on the Red menace, or one of our Generals invoking God (as they do nowadays in all their speeches)? The work of the secret police and of the military breeds special types of mentality, with their own characteristic professional biases and emotional colorations. These things are unavoidable in these special tasks. The point is that in a free society special biases tend to cancel off in free debate, and that special constitutional safeguards are set up to prevent control by those very types of men on which this report relies. The very structure of the government was designed to perpetuate civilian as against military control, and the main bulwarks of the Constitution were erected against abuses by the police.

VII

We have come full circle in our constitutional development. One of the tests set up by this report for a security risk is whether a man is prepared to subordinate his private judgment to that of the security police. In the section on whether a man may be loyal and still a security risk, the report says a proper attitude of mind "must include an understanding and an acceptance of security measures adopted by responsible Government agencies." This implies that the government knows best and its decision must be accepted. "It must involve," the report continues, "an active cooperation with all agencies of Government properly and reasonably

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concerned with the security of our country." "Active cooperation" would seem to be a euphemism here for informing.

But this is not all. The report goes on to say that this proper frame of mind "must involve a subordination of personal judgment as to the security status of an individual as against a professional judgment in the light of standards and procedures when they have been established by appropriate process." Finally, the report says, "It must entail a wholehearted commitment to the preservation of the security system and the avoidance of conduct tending to confuse or obstruct." What is thus called for is complete allegiance to the FBI. Anything which might "confuse or obstruct" is to be avoided.

On the altar of security as thus established all else is to be sacrificed. In discussing Oppenheimer's readiness to defend Dr. Edward U. Condon* and his continued friendship for certain security suspects, the report says pompously, "Loyalty to one's friends is one of the noblest of qualities." But it adds immediately afterward, "Being loyal to one's friends above reasonable obligations to the country and to the security system, however, is not clearly consistent with the interests of security."

It is because of these friendships that the majority found Oppenheimer a security risk, though loyal. It complains that several times Oppenheimer declined to answer questions by the FBI about friends, declaring the questions irrelevant. It uses an extraordinary phrase to condemn Oppenheimer for this. It says "he has repeatedly exercised an arrogance of his own judgment with respect to the loyalty and reliability of other citizens to an extent which has frustrated and at times impeded the working of the system."

A medieval inquisitor might have used that phrase—"the arrogance of his own judgment." At least an ecclesiastical court would have been setting up over private judgment some system of ancient and venerable tradition. This sets it up against the anonymous judgment of a notoriously unreliable and politically illiterate secret police.

VIII

A striking example of how wrong, unfair and vengeful the secret police can be is afforded by this report's references to Joseph W. Weinberg, once notorious as "Scientist X." He is flatly called a Communist and accused of having been involved in espionage. Yet nowhere in this report is there the slightest reference to the fact that when Weinberg denied these charges under oath and was tried for perjury here in the District of Columbia he was acquitted. He had been long pursued by the FBI and smeared by the House Un-American Activities Committee (in its 1948 pre-election special Atomic Espionage report). Yet when he failed to plead the Fifth and the government finally got him into court, the government failed ignominiously to prove a case.

One of the witnesses against Weinberg was the same Paul Crouch who gave testimony against Oppenheimer. Crouch is one of the government's stable of kept witnesses. His testimony is shot through with distortions and contradictions, and typical splurges of remembering years later what he could not earlier recall. The one allegation of Communist association against Oppenheimer which the hearing board dismissed as "inconclusive" was Crouch's story that the Communists held a meeting in the scientist's home with Oppenheimer in attendance in the summer of 1941.* Oppenheimer presented evidence to show that he was away from home during that period and no such meeting could have taken place. One wonders why the hearing board could do no better than to call this allegation "inconclusive." Was this an example on its own part of that wholehearted acceptance of security methods (informers and all?) which it sets up as a standard for judging risks?

IX

Nothing that ever came from the pen of Edgar Allan Poe quite matches in horror the full report of the special hearing board in the Oppenheimer case. A great scientist, a sensitive man, a loyal and devoted citizen (by the board's own findings) was confronted again with the regurgitation from the sewers of the security files.

But perhaps nothing in the story is more horrible than the defense offered in the dissenting opinion. Professor Evans said there was not "the slightest vestige of information" to indicate that Oppenheimer was not loyal, and added—as if this was the highest recommendation—"He hates Russia."

Not just communism alone, but "Russia," a whole nation, a historic concept, a hundred million people. But where but in present day Russia could one match the standards, the police state philosophy, the suspicions of this report? Must a scientist "hate Russia" to be respectable? Is it not his province to try and understand what "Russia" is? Can a Christian nation thus enforce a new Gospel of Hate? Can a nation be really secure which demands blind unreasoning hatred instead of understanding? Is it not likely this way to blunder into war and disaster?

McCarthy Slips On The Banana

Mr. Chavez. At the beginning of the address of the Senator from Wisconsin—and I believe everyone agrees with him that we should prevent enslavement by any Communist government—he mentioned Guatemala. What about the enslavement of the people of Guatemala by economic pressure? Would the Senator from Wisconsin care to give us his ideas on that subject?

Mr. McCarthy. Let me say to the Senator from New Mexico that the enslavement of people in Guatemala is the same as Communist enslavement anywhere else. Guatemala is under the thumb of the Communist conspiracy, which at this time is attempting to sweep into other Central and South American countries.

Mr. Chavez. That is bad; but what about enslavement by the United Fruit Company?

Mr. McCarthy. I cannot answer as to that.

Mr. Chavez. I will tell the Senator from Wisconsin: The people of Honduras and Guatemala are starving under a form of economic enslavement.

—U. S. Senate, May 19.

* The report does not call Dr. Condon a security risk but criticizes Oppenheimer for being ready to defend Condon even though Condon criticized him. Oppenheimer is condemned for not being vindictive!

* Last week Crouch threatened to file a $1,000,000 libel suit against the Alsop brothers for exposing him in their columns and demanded an investigation into what he termed a conspiracy by the Alsops, Drew Pearson, the Honolulu Record, the Daily Worker, the Nation and I. F. Stone's Weekly to damage his reputation.

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By Ralph Barton Perry: A Plea for A Live-and-Let-Live World

Because of its urgent timeliness, we are reprinting from the New York Times of May 27 a letter by Ralph Barton Perry, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Harvard, which we believe deserves to be circulated as widely as possible by peace groups here and abroad.—IFS.

Some years ago the country was persuaded to adopt the policy of "negotiation from strength," and during the interval the strength has been achieved and published at home and abroad. This policy was taken to mean that when it became apparent that our policy was not dictated by weakness the emphasis would be shifted to negotiation. But this is not what has happened. In proportion as our military and industrial power has been increased we have become increasingly disposed to threaten and to lay down ultimata.

In order that their political support may be obtained the American people have been encouraged to believe that they can have their way in the world provided only that they keep ahead in efficiency of atomic weapons and in the size of the stockpile. We are increasingly dictatorial in relation to our associates and increasingly bitter and suspicious toward our opponents. This attitude of mind is unrealistic and fatuous.

The world is likely for some decades to come to be divided into two opposing camps so evenly balanced that open war, implemented by modern technology, would be so devastating as to prevent the realization of the aims of either party. There is no possibility of peace by force in any constructive sense of the term "peace"; in the sense, namely, of a resumption of the social and cultural progress through goodwill and cooperation. The only alternative to a peace by negotiation is a prolonged stalemate or an era of violence in which all parties are ruined altogether.

Peace Requires Patience and Mutual Concessions

Peace by negotiation does not mean the abandonment of principle. It means that the realization of the kind of world which we desire, and rightly desire, must be postponed until it can be realized by peaceful persuasion; as is now, after centuries of wasteful bloodshed, recognized in the sphere of religion. Meanwhile we must live together on the surface of the same planet with those with whom we profoundly disagree and whose creed we hope and believe will ultimately be rejected by the suffrage of mankind.

Peace by negotiation implies that there shall be a flexibility of policy adapted to time, place and circumstance. It implies making concessions as well as demanding them. The door to negotiation is closed by every absolute laid down in advance, such as the nonrecognition of Communist China, or the nonadmission of Communist China to the United Nations, or the nonpartitioning of Korea, Germany or Indochina.

Peace by negotiation implies a residue of comity, patience despite provocations. It implies a will to agree, never silenced or weakened by the acrimony of dispute. Peace by negotiation implies that the initiative and leadership in world affairs pass from the bitter-enders, however strong, and the utopians, however idealistic, to statesmen who contrive workable formulas of settlement.

Officials Imprisoned By Their Own Propaganda

The diplomatic agencies are said to be imprisoned by public opinion and by domestic policies. This is undoubtedly true, but it is often forgotten that these agencies themselves are largely responsible for the imprisonment. Public officials themselves create political forces and popular attitudes. They are the principal instruments not only of political action but of political education. Through their perpetual harping on the menace of communism they have created a political atmosphere in which anti-communism has become the chief condition of social prestige and of appointment or election to office.

In this atmosphere paramount political power is exercised by full-time career anti-Communists who have no other asset or qualification whatsoever—no ideas, no solutions of problems, no enlightenment, nothing but the tedious reiteration of this negative appeal to fear and suspicion.

Strength means not only bargaining power, but also magnanimity. A powerful America can afford to make concessions without loss of pride. There is a kind of pride which manifests itself in self-congratulation, boasting or the brandishing of weapons, and which has to be excited by a tribal war dance. This is the pride of the weak. The pride of the strong manifests itself in the steady pursuit of long-range objectives of the sort which can be achieved only by understanding and generosity.

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